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The Lords of Dumbo Make Room for the Arts, at Least for the Moment

By [ROBIN POGREBIN](#)

George Dombek pays rent on his 1,400-square-foot, light-filled studio at 20 Jay Street with his paintings, which lately focus on water towers and upside-down tin pails on posts.

The Galapagos Art Space will pay \$6.82 per square foot a year when it moves into a 102-year-old, 10,000-square-foot former stable at 16 Main Street this spring.

St. Ann's Warehouse, a performance space in an old spice-milling factory at 38 Water Street, pays no rent at all.

Some 1,000 artists and arts organizations are now working in the Dumbo section of Brooklyn, courtesy of the developers David Walentas and his son, Jed, partners in Two Trees Management. Operating on the principle that cultural ferment makes a neighborhood hot, Two Trees has offered creative people rents that they cannot refuse.

"It adds value to any neighborhood," David Walentas said in an interview at a conference table in his unflashy Dumbo office. "It's like good architecture. Good architecture is cheap and adds value. People will pay a premium for it."

Yet given the pace of gentrification, the future of the neighborhood's artists — and of Dumbo's artistic character — remains uncertain. Two months after Dumbo, named for its area Down Under the Manhattan Bridge Overpass, was designated a landmark in December, the City Planning Department proposed last week that the neighborhood be rezoned to allow taller buildings in high-density areas. Dumbo is historically considered to be the area between the Brooklyn and Manhattan Bridges and between the East River and Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, but blocks on the other side of the Manhattan Bridge are now often considered part of the area.

Mitchell L. Moss, a professor of urban policy and planning at [New York University](#), gives David Walentas points for figuring out how to make a neighborhood vital. "He understands that you have to have creative energy," Mr. Moss said. "This is an intelligent and strategic move."

But some artists are troubled by the notion of developers using artists to help invigorate or market a neighborhood even as artists are priced out of more established areas. "This

really represents the broader picture, where cities are becoming impossible places for creative producers to live and work, where the notions of loft living and ‘bohemian’ become selling points in the development of real estate,” the artist Barbara Kruger said. “Artists have nowhere else to turn so they take those work spaces. It’s their work to make the neighborhood cool; then they can be moved out.”

Other artists say David Walentas has a long-term commitment to culture in Dumbo and is simply speeding along a process that can’t easily happen on its own because of rising commercial real-estate prices. “He’s doing artificially what used to happen naturally over a longer period of time, like forcing a tulip bulb,” said the artist [Chuck Close](#), who serves on the board of the Marie Walsh Sharpe Art Foundation, which is based in Dumbo. “It doesn’t happen organically the way it used to. Now you need a break.”

“Clearly, he wants to make a buck,” he added. “But it’s community building.”

The Two Trees developers, who own about three million square feet of property in Dumbo, tell their tenants that they will try to find other places for them in the area if their spaces are sold or developed. But they make no guarantees. “Things change,” David Walentas said. “Some will stay, some will die, some will move, some will go out of business. We can’t solve all their problems.

“It’s like everything in life. It’s not forever.”

The developers are up front with the tenants about the short-term nature of their leases. “It was always straightforward,” said Kathleen Gilrain, the executive director of Smack Mellon. “He doesn’t spring stuff on us. Buildings are developed all over New York City, and those landlords don’t give any space away.” When Two Trees converted 70 Washington Street to condos, it offered almost every artist in the building below-market rates at one of its other buildings, 20 Jay Street or 55 Washington Street, and 80 percent accepted. “We’re in a unique position to do these things because we own the whole neighborhood,” Jed Walentas said.

They don’t own all of it. While the Walentases say they would eventually like to move the St. Ann’s Warehouse organization to the brick ruins of the 19th-century Tobacco Warehouse in Empire-Fulton Ferry State Park, that property belongs to the state. They also want to convert the Empire Stores Warehouse, on Water Street between Dock and Main Streets, into studio and gallery space, but the state owns that too.

Affordable studios, galleries and stages are hard to come by in New York City. The Galapagos Art Space was on the verge of leaving Williamsburg, Brooklyn, for Berlin because its monthly rent had risen by \$10,000. David Walentas offered the company below-market space. “He’s doing what the city should be doing,” said Robert Elmes, director of Galapagos. “He’s proving that it works.”

The city, for its part, appreciates what Two Trees is doing. “In an ideal world everyone would have space to work in perpetuity,” said Kate D. Levin, the cultural affairs commissioner. “That’s not the reality of New York real estate.”

“He doesn’t sweep in in the middle of the night and evict people,” she added. “Providing space for people to make work and for people to come see it is a huge commitment.”

David Walentas clearly enjoys coming to the rescue. “We’ve been very, very generous because I like it,” he said. “I don’t need the money. It’s a way of putting people in my buildings.”

On a recent tour of Dumbo he walked through some of these buildings, like the paint-splattered studios of the Triangle Arts Association at 20 Jay Street (rent: free), where a visiting French artist, Gregory Forstner, was working on canvases of dogs in combat helmets. Mr. Walentas also showed off Smack Mellon’s soaring new two-level gallery space on Plymouth Street, where huge pieces of sculpture were installed, and other tenants like the Brooklyn Arts Council, the Brooklyn Stained Glass Conservation Center and Dancing Diablo, an animation company (as well as the chocolate shop [Jacques Torres](#) and the bakery Almondine on Water Street).

“I’m very proud,” Mr. Walentas said. “I tell people I’ve done a lot of things. They matter; they don’t matter. In 100 years Dumbo will matter.”

Two Trees has handpicked its tenants along the way, and David Walentas makes a point of saying that he is not responsible for Dumbo’s Starbucks and doesn’t want chain stores in the neighborhood. The rents the developers charge are all over the map. In the 55 Washington building, for example, the James Glass Studio pays \$6.77 per square foot per year; Chris Perry Woodworking, \$11.39; and the Robinson & Grisaru architectural firm, \$19. At 45 Main Street, Lynn Veitzer, an artist, pays \$14.61; Jennifer Riley, also an artist, \$12.79; and the Dumbo Arts Center, zero. The Galapagos has a 15-year lease, but many leases are for two years.

“It depends on the space and who they are and what they contribute,” David Walentas said. “A number have personal relationships or catch us on a good day and get a slightly different deal.”

As a result arts groups would seem to have to stay on their toes and in the good graces of the Walentas family. Since St. Ann’s Warehouse moved to Dumbo in 2001 after 21 years in a Brooklyn Heights church, the performance organization has been drawing audiences and helping to attract retail stores and residents. But the developers have made it clear that the organization will eventually have to move. (David Walentas serves on the St. Ann’s board.)

“They said, ‘As long as you’re contributing to the neighborhood, you can be our guests here,’ ” said Susan Feldman, the artistic director. “David and Jed kept saying: ‘Don’t get attached. We’re going to take the building down.’”

“There are moments when it gets scary,” she said. “We’re at their mercy.” But she added: “That was the deal when we came in. They are developers.”

Because the situation is temporary, St. Ann’s has held off on making some changes to the theater, like installing air conditioning. “There are limitations with the building because we’re only on borrowed time,” Ms. Feldman said.

“I always think in two-year increments,” she said. “I can live with that.”

In 2003 the Walentases told Smack Mellon that it had to vacate its gallery and studio space at 56 Water Street to make room for a 1922 carousel restored by David Walentas’s wife, Jane, an artist. But the developers moved Smack Mellon into a former boiler house at 92 Plymouth Street, gratis, and helped pay for the renovation.

“It’s a big undertaking to relocate a whole organization,” said Suzanne Kim, the director of exhibitions at Smack Mellon. But she said the new space “turned out to be even better” and that “free rent is always worth it,” adding, “There’s no way we could afford a space like this.”

Similarly Mr. Dombek said he was grateful for his studio, which allows him to have a New York presence, although he is based in Arkansas. But he concedes that the uncertainty can be unsettling.

“I’m going to spend money and time putting up walls,” he said. “I’m concerned you’re coming in someday and saying, ‘Leave.’ I don’t know if it will take 5 years or 10 years or 2 years.”

“I would assume artists are going to be pushed out,” he added. “They always are.”